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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the cultural differences that arise because of disability, ethnicity, and social status and their impact on assessment practices, programming, goal setting, and the special education processes established by legislation, especially in light of the over-representation of minorities in special education. Suggestions for resolving existing cultural barriers include encouraging parent groups to become involved and providing professionals with culturally competent information and suggested practices. The paper considers the conceptual discrepancies and cultural barriers that exist between minority families and the special education system. Overrepresentation of minorities in special education is discussed in terms of historical patterns, assessment procedures, and legal suits and legislation. A section on definitions and stratifications considers minority classifications, disability categories, and class and status categories. Parental rights in special education as documented by court litigation and legislation are reviewed. Existing cultural differences are identified through consideration of typically American cultural values, contrasting values of identity, contrasting views of disability, and contrasting views of relationships. Implications of cultural differences for parental involvement in the schools are discussed. Specific recommendations to increase parental involvement are offered. (Contains 41 references.) (DB)

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Addressing Minority Overrepresentation in Special Education: Cultural Barriers to Effective Collaboration

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Abstract

The overrepresentation of minorities in special education suggests that multicultural competence is of critical importance for professionals. The more common strategies of using interpreters and translating documents do not address the profound differences that exist in basic values and beliefs. This paper examines the cultural differences that arise because of disability, ethnicity, and social status and their impact on assessment practices, programming and goal setting, and the special education processes established by legislation. Suggestions for resolving existing cultural barriers include support through parent groups and providing professionals with culturally competent information and practices.

> Second only to the tax collector, the schools cast the largest net thrown by government. Thus, schools have been asked to bear the brunt of social reform. But in making schools the focal point of social reform and new government services for disabled children, policymakers have undertaken to transform the school and probably change its function from one of education alone to one of education plus physical health, mental health, and social services. Can the schools carry this burden? Should they be asked to? (Turnbull, 1993, p. 152)

Despite a growing minority population in this country and despite an unduly high percentage of minority students in special education programs (Harry, 1992a), the profound impacts of cultural diversity on public education are rarely addressed. These issues go far beyond recognizing that African American families may use Black English, or that interpreters are needed at meetings and for translating documents for non-English speaking families. Strict legal compliance is grossly insufficient for addressing the multiple aspects of cross-cultural communication and collaboration that arise with every note, report, telephone call, or meeting between the families and their schools.

Minority families in special education must cope with difficulties brought on by their minority status in addition to frequently lower income levels, both of which are compounded by having an exceptional child (Harry, 1992a). Little assistance is provided by the schools or other community services in helping families with these difficulties (Harry, 1992a). In addition, this country's disability categories are primarily defined according to middle-class developmental norms (Gliedman & Roth, 1980). As a result, the diagnosis applied to the child of a minority family may be one that doesn't exist within their own cultural norms, whose definition is based on values they don't

understand, and is presented by a system that may exclude them as a result of their social status.

This paper examines the conceptual discrepancies and cultural barriers that exist between minority families and the special education system, and how this has served to isolate these families from participating in their children's education. The scope of this problem is substantial because of the overrepresentation of minority children in special education; in many classrooms they constitute a majority (Harry, 1992a). The definitions of minority, disability, class, and status will be used to illustrate the specific American cultural values and barriers that confront these families. The impact of these values will be examined in terms of special education services. Lastly, changes and suggestions will be offered to help resolve the cultural disparities that exist and to promote greater multicultural collaboration.

Overrepresentation of Minorities in Special Education

Historical Patterns

Despite a popular belief that education is the primary means for ensuring a literate electorate and an enduring democracy, public school education in America quite frequently has been used as a tool to promote the values of the majority (Turnbull, 1993). The compulsory education laws of the late 1800s and early 1900s were enacted largely from a desire to gain control over the socialization process of immigrant children, particularly with regard to the influx of Catholics in a historically Protestant country (Hobbs, 1975). Special education was used a means of classifying and segregating the immigrant population of Irish, Italians, Germans, Russians, and others

flooding the schools and isolating them from the more established Americans (Sarason and Doris, 1979).

Apparently, the practice of segregating minorities has not ended. In 1968, 60%-80% of children in special education classes were from poor and minority backgrounds including African Americans, Native Americans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans (Sarason & Doris, 1979). The legal suit of Larry P. v. Riles (1972) was prompted by grossly unequal ratios, such that African American students represented 28.5% of the school population but 66% of the EMR (Educably Mentally Retarded) classes in San Francisco (Prasse and Reschly, 1986). The pattern was consistent across the entire state although less dramatic, with African American students comprising 10% of the population but 25% of the EMR classes.

In a 1986 survey, the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (1987) reported twice as many African American students in classes for EMR (Educably Mentally Retarded) students, with 1.5 as many students in SED (Severely Emotionally Disturbed) and TMR (Trainable Mentally Retarded) classes (Harry, 1992a). Asian students, however, were underrepresented. More recent figures indicate high rates for both Native American and Hispanic in all classes for students with mentally retardation, comprising more than 4% of their respective populations. Other ethnic groups are substantially lower with Asian Americans at 2.63%, African Americans at 2.01%, and Whites at 1.63% (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Native Americans also have the highest rate for Serious Emotional Disturbance and Specific Learning Disabilities classes at 9.23% and 4.20% of their populations, respectively, whereas, other ethnic groups are between .80% and 3.00% with

whites being the lowest. Although, the pattern apparently has changed, overrepresentation of minorities still exists.

Assessment Procedures

Intelligence tests and other standardized measurement practices have been blamed as the tools for accomplishing much of this segregation. The history of testing practices in fact, is based upon identification and separation of ethnic minorities. Goddard introduced the Binet test into this country for intelligence testing in the early 1900s and used it to determine that 80% of the immigrant populations (Jews, Hungarians, Italians, and Russians) were "feebleminded" (Sarason & Doris, 1979).

In 1979 the U. S. Department of Education Office of Special Education examined school referral, assessment, and placement practices in special education to identify possible bias. One of the findings was that the nature of the evaluations of children was based on ethnicity, and that diagnosticians and teachers:

> rated nonacademic factors as less important for both minority and nonminority children, but as somewhat more important for minority children. This finding suggests that adaptive behavior, aggression, or hallmarks of minority culture were at play in assessment (Turnbull, 1993, p. 114).

In addition, approximately twice as many minority students as nonminority students were determined as "probably mentally retarded" although only 4% were placed in these programs (Turnbull, 1993).

Gartner and Lipsky (1987) summarized a number of studies and found that minority group or socioeconomic status at variance with the local district was more likely to lead to a referral. In addition, they found that the testing performed usually was driven by earlier decisions and that criteria often were

changed when tests did not produce desired outcomes. Turnbull (1993) believes that the recent Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (IDEA) "implicitly acknowledges that a bias based on socioeconomic, racial, or ethnic characteristics may exist against these populations. The recognition of that bias in testing is the basis for the principle of 'nondiscriminatory evaluation.'" (Turnbull, 1993, p. 87).

Students with limited English proficiency also encounter difficulties with assessment practices. Fradd, Barona, and de Barona (1989) have found that school personnel and assessment procedures generally are not sensitive to differentiating between school performance problems due to linguistic or cultural differences, and the presence of a disability. Apparently, this situation continues to be problematic. Even more recently, the New York City Board of Education (1994) reported that Latino students, and particularly those with limited English proficiency, were overrepresented in their special educational classes.

Legal Suits and Legislation

Several legal suits have addressed misuses of testing with minority students. The suit of Diana v. State Board of Education (1973) resulted in requirements that minority students be tested in their native language (Prasse & Reschly, 1986; Turnbull, 1993). Larry P. v Riles (1972) and PASE v. Hannon (1980) examined cultural bias in standardized testing with African American students but with opposing results. Larry P. found such testing to be discriminatory, however PASE did not (Turnbull, 1993). In the latter case, developments since the passage of P.L. 94-142 had ensured that placement decisions were made by a committee rather than a single individual and were

no longer based on one assessment. Standardized testing also was implicated in Hobson v. Hansen (1967) with regard to its use and effects on ability grouping on minority students in the D.C. public schools (Hobbs, 1975). Judge J. Skelly specifically blamed inaccurate and misleading test scores that resulted in children being wrongfully undereducated and unlawfully segregated.

The passage of P.L. 94-142 resulted in mandates for nondiscriminatory assessment procedures to protect minority special education students. In addition, Section 1409 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, P.L. 101-476) requires the Department of Education to fund studies on the overrepresentation of minority students in special education (Turnbull, 1993, p. 86). However, questions regarding use of testing as a means of segregating minorities have yet to be resolved. The conflicting court decisions (Larry P. v. Riles and PASE v. Hannon) continue to confuse the issue and the legislation (P.L. 94-142 and IDEA) neither clarifies nor identifies the nondiscriminatory assessment procedures to be used (Turnbull, 1993). The ethics of using white middle-class norms to identify developmental and achievement difficulties in minority students were raised with Larry P. with no clear answers. Gliedman and Roth (1980) criticize the use of able-bodied normative and standardized assessments in making judgments about any population with a disability. Fradd, Barona, and de Barona (1989) also express concern about the cultural judgments resulting from use of standardized measures of emotional health with ethnic minorities.

Despite the mandated assessment procedures, a disproportionate number of ethnic minority and non-English speaking children continue to be classified as needing special education services. Boys also are more likely to be

referred to special education programs, particularly if they are aggressive or of racial and ethnic minorities (Turnbull, 1993). Special education cannot be described as an "equal opportunity" social service program.

Definitions and Stratifications: Minorities, Disabilities, and Social Class

Classification systems tend to operationalize existing cultural definitions in terms of similarity or difference to specific majority values. Thus, the classification of minorities, disabilities, and social class reflect American values that generally hold white middle-class families to be the norm (Hobbs, 1975). The importance of these norms is in their impact on the procedures used by social institutions in providing services--procedures that tend to be predicated on the clients or recipients behaving according to cultural expectations and standards. When these clients do not, the services they receive may not be satisfactory. The classification systems used in this country are examined in this section to illustrate some of the inconsistencies and resulting difficulties for persons who do not fit our cultural norms.

Minority Classifications

The Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights provides a classification system used by many schools in tracking their population of students (U.S. Department of Education, 1987). The system appears to differentiate between individuals on the basis of race or ethnicity (Harry, 1992a); however, population genetics and physical anthropology have provided insights in human diversity which question the meaning of "race" (Pollitzer, 1994). Inherited traits and a common gene pool may be shared by

discrete human populations within a single location, and very broad racial differences may be seen between the Caucasoid, sub-Saharan African, and Asian groupings (Pollitzer, 1994). However, Pollitzer describes race as relative rather than absolute and recommends the use of racial processes rather than specific classifications.

An example of the difficulties of classifying by "race" is seen in the Office for Civil Rights' categories. They are as follows:

> American Indian or Alaskan Native: A person having origins in any of the original people of North America and who maintains cultural identification through tribal affiliation or community recognition.
>
> Asian or Pacific Islander: A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands, or the Indian subcontinent. This area includes, for example, China, India, Japan, Korea, the Philippine Islands, and Samoa.
>
> Hispanic: A person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture or origin--regardless of race.
>
> Black (not of Hispanic origin): A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa.
>
> White (not of Hispanic origin): A person having origins in any of the original people of Europe, North Africa, or the Middle East. (U.S. Department of Education, 1987, Form ED102, Appendix A)

Using this system, persons from Spain and Portugal are European and not Hispanic. The non-European Hispanic persons are separated from others as forming their own group, "regardless of race." People of India are included with Asian and Pacific Islanders although in other circumstances they may be considered of Caucasoid origin. Harry (1992a) has concluded that the critical dimension of this classification is whether or not one is of European and white descent. As stated by Pollitzer (1994), racial differentiations are not

particularly objective, and the system used by the Department of Education would appear to reflect white American cultural values.

Disability Categories

Definitions of disability also reflect differences from American middle-class norms--with regard to intellectual performance, physical, emotional, and other abilities or attributes. Mental retardation has been typically defined in terms of deviation from a standard intelligence quotient. Vision and hearing impairment classifications also are based on difference from normal standards of acuity (Ysseldyke et al., 1992). In addition to these general standards, to qualify for special education services, regardless of the presence of a disability, there must also be evidence of adverse educational achievement. Again, this is determined based upon notions of "normal" expectations of progress in educational achievement and behavior--a child is compared to a standard performance and growth rate, and found to be deviant or lacking (Ysseldyke et al., 1992).

Evidence for the cultural basis in determining a disability can be found in a number of changes made in categories and definitions over the years, and in fluctuations in prevalence rates for disabilities among school children. Were disability categories based upon authentic differentiating characteristics, it is not expected that many changes would occur. However, between the years 1978 to 1990 the category of Learning Disabilities grew dramatically, Emotional Disturbance increased slightly, and the numbers of children with Speech and Language Impairments, Hearing Impairments, and Mental Retardation gradually decreased (Ysseldyke et al., 1992). In 1990, IDEA created two new categories of disability and began investigating a possible

third. Ysseldyke et al. (1992) describe this as "evidence of professionals' willingness to be seduced by categories and individual differences" (p. 112). In addition, large variances are found between states in the numbers (rate) and types of categories served with some states choosing not use any categorization for disability (Ysseldyke et al., 1992). Despite the passage of specific legislation, apparently there is no standardization in identification of special education students.

Particular disabilities have proven especially difficult to define. Prasse and Reschly (1986) report a change in the type of students now served in EMH (Educably Mentally Handicapped) classes in comparison to 10 or 15 years ago. This category also is somewhat anomalous in that it is not permanent, it impacts no other social roles, nor is it caused by physical or biological factors all of which make it vulnerable to social and cultural influences. The category of Learning Disabilities has proven similarly difficult. The definition was vague enough and the growth in size so substantial, that Congress placed a 12% cap on the number of students identified, in order to control potential problems of overidentifying students (states receive per capita state and federal monies) (Ysseldyke et al., 1992). In addition, the Congressional definition contains, perhaps unwittingly, cultural, racial, and socioeconomic biases by excluding any child with an environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. Turnbull and others conclude that this limitation implies that specific learning disabilities are therefore, only to be found among white middle- or upper-class children (Turnbull, 1993, p. 89).

In addition to current difficulties in classifying and identifying students needing special services, the result of being identified has a negative

impact on a child's future educational program and opportunities. Two suits have addressed these educational limitations: Mills v. D.C. Board of Education (1980; limited outcomes for students labeled as disabled) and Hobson v. Hansen (1967; limited outcomes as a result of tracking) both led to procedural changes in the schools. These suits upheld the fundamental right of minority children with disabilities to receive an equal and appropriate education according to the due process clause of the Fifth Amendment of the Constitution (Mills also cited the Fourteenth Amendment). The concerns these suits raise potential become even greater, when the process of being declared "disabled" apparently remains so arbitrary and variable, based upon changing national, state, and possibly local notions of disability.

Class and Status Categories

In addition to ethnic difference and the impact of having a child with a disability, income level is another important variable on which many minority families differ from middle-class standards (Harry, 1992a). Low income and poverty is not merely judged as deficient in terms of money (Rose, 1972) but frequently is viewed as a distinctive subculture of American life, and one that carries with it an intergenerational cycle. Hobbs (1975) states that the poor have an equally strong a work ethic as do middle class individuals, but have developed apathy from an inability to fulfill their goals, and as an adaptation to repeated failure and the condition of poverty. And although the social movements of the 1960s created a view of poverty as a social rather than personal failure, the poor continue to be seen as having a distinctly "different" and "deficient" value system.

Miller and Roby (1970) have identified income as one of four important components of social stratification within our culture which is comprised of economic class, status, power, and educational and social mobility. The impacts upon an individual are multiple and variables often interact. Those who are less well-educated often are less able to take advantage of opportunities within society and are more poorly treated despite a similar income level. The poor, who tend to be more dependent upon government programs, also tend to lack the skills of better-off and better-educated persons in managing bureaucratic and organizational systems effectively.

Miller and Roby (1970) suggest that improvement on one variable does not ensure a raise in the social stratum--that although income level may be advanced by specific job attainment, if the cultural group is devalued in status, a person's social power will not be much changed. This failure was seen in the limited results of many of the poverty programs of the 1960s which addressed one variable, for example job attainment or increased education, without effecting significant stratum change.

The impact of socioeconomic factors was referenced in the judicial opinion for PACE v. Hannon (1980). The court found that "it was 'uncontradicted that most of the children in the EMH [Educably Mentally Handicapped] classes do in fact come from the poverty pockets' of Chicago" (Turnbull, 1993, p. 95). Although the problems of class was recognized, the categorization and overrepresentation was upheld based on the frequent inclusion of an African American professional on the decision-making team. Whether or not such ethnic representation effectively addresses this problem, however, is unclear.

Rather than representing a set of universal, objective, and well-defined standards, the classifications of minority, disability, and social class represent differences from characteristics of the American cultural majority--the middle and upper-middle class. These classifications are fluid and subject to changing interests and pressures within society. Being a minority, disabled, and not of middle-class status in America creates disparities and conflicts in expectations and values, thereby impacting the effectiveness with which one is able to maneuver within society. Although special education parents have been granted extensive protections, their status within society often negatively impacts their ability to effectively utilize them. This next section examines some of these rights.

Parental Rights in Special Education

The passage of P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, guaranteed revolutionary new rights to students with disabilities and their parents. These rights were further extended by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (P.L. 101-476). The first act, P.L. 94-142, was the result of several critical lawsuits that addressed inequities in placement decisions for students with disabilities when undertaken solely by school personnel. The legal precedent for this suit which established the fundamental right of all children to an equal educational opportunity guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause, was established by Brown v. the Board of Education (1954) (Turnbull, 1993). It is ironic that the rights of African American children to attend non-segregated

schools established similar rights for children with disabilities; yet, the rights of minority children in special education have been so consistently neglected.

The specific protections that were enacted as part of P.L. 94-142 were based upon the findings from the suits of PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1972), and Mills v. D.C. Board of Education (1972) (Turnbull, 1993). These two suits resulted in six principles and legal guarantees for special education children and their parents as follows:

1. Zero Reject: to prevent exclusion of all or some children with disabilities from schools or within school programs;

2. Nondiscriminatory Assessment: tests must be administered in the child's native language and be validated for the specific purpose for which they are used, they must be administered by trained personnel with a single test not used as the sole criterion for classification and placement but supplemented by other evaluation techniques;

3. Free Appropriate Public Education: education that provides equality of opportunity and meets the needs of the child with a disability;

4. Least Restrictive Environment: integration of a child with disabilities into the regular educational program to the maximum extent appropriate and that provides a continuum of allowable settings for special education;

5. Procedural Due Process: the right of a citizen (child with a disability and his or her parents) to protest action of the state education agency or the local education agency;

6. Parental Participation and Shared Decision Making: based upon the principle of participatory democracy which describes shared decision making regarding the legal right or political opportunities of those affected by a public agency's decisions (Turnbull, 1993).

Procedural due process may be the most important principle for minority parents because it is the means of challenging school practices that have historically proven to be discriminatory. It also provides a means of

enforcing the first four principles (Turnbull, 1993). Establishing satisfactory parent participation potentially would eliminate much of the need for subsequent due process procedures. Yet, it is participation and shared decision making that are so negatively impacted by cultural disparities.

When satisfaction cannot be achieved through IEP meetings, either the school or the parents may ask for a hearing and thus, institute due process proceedings. Difficult as legal proceedings may be, those faced by minority parents are more profound. Gliedman and Roth (1980) describe the existence of barriers as inherent, based on the cultural expectations of those who drafted the law.

> Unfortunately, as presently formulated, the provisions concerning procedural due process suffer from the same kinds of limitations that beset the law's [P.L. 94-142] attempt to ensure that parents participate actively in the school's process of decision making. Once again, the law presupposes the possession of cultural styles, personal abilities, and financial resources that few parents possess. (Gliedman & Roth, 1980, p. 190)

If ethnicity, limited English proficiency and education, limited income and resources, or limited social status are factors, it is quite probable that parents will be less comfortable with the legal system, and less likely to utilize legal measures and do so successfully. Yet, these are the proscribed means for resolving differences with the school--parents are expected to be willing, able, and sufficiently knowledgeable about the legal system in order to undertake action. They are expected to be assertive and aggressive in advocating for their children's rights (Harry, 1992a).

Legal action and legislation often have worked in together in addressing unfair practices regarding children with disabilities and occurred

with the legal suits that led to the passage of P.L. 94-142 (Turnbull, 1993). The rationale for this approach is based on the belief that the law can be an effective tool for social engineering (Moore, 1978). This presumes, however, that social arrangements are susceptible to conscious human control and tends to neglect evidence that social patterns are extremely resilient and often effectively stronger than the law suits and legislation addressing change. As a consequence, many legislative acts fail to achieve their intended purposes and address only individual components of particular systems resulting in piecemeal and scattered impacts in creating change (Moore, 1978).

By failing to address the scope of parents who need to access these legal protections, special education legislation has substantially limited its usefulness and impact. And despite well-publicized suits and strong legislative mandates, unfair testing practices and placement procedures continue to exist. The efforts to re-engineer society have met with only partial success.

Although there have been a number of legal actions undertaken by minorities, the cultural barriers that exist in accessing, understanding, and making full and culturally appropriate use of these rights make this a potentially highly underlitigated area. This next section more fully examines some of the fundamental differences in values that lead to cultural barriers between minority parents and special education.

Existing Cultural Differences

American Cultural Values

Within American society and the majority middle-class culture, there are certain values considered to be "normal" and acceptable (Hobbs, 1975).

Persons who don't subscribe to these values may have difficulty with public institutions and other organizations that often represent these values. Some of these culturally valued American traits include:

1. being rational;
2. being efficient in the use of one's time and energy;
3. controlling distracting impulses and delaying gratification;
4. valuing work over play;
5. being economically and socially successful and ambitious;
6. being independent and self-reliant;
7. being physically whole, healthy, and attractive;
8. being white and native-born; and
9. being intellectually superior (Hobbs, 1975).

The cultural norms for efficiency and rational decision-making impact how our society designs and manages its organizations and systems. Americans tend to prefer technological and smoothly operating organizations (Harry, 1992a). Special education IEP meetings are founded on principles of systematic, efficient, objective, and rational decision-making procedures. Other cultures which value personal relationships and empathy in decision making may find these same systematic procedures to be "empty" and ineffective. Cultures that are egalitarian, nonjudgmental, and noncompetitive may have difficulty understanding and accepting public school programs that often emphasize individual growth through competitiveness in earning points, grades, stickers, and "winning." In addition, many programs and curricula promote economic success, ambition, independence, and self-

reliance. Minority and other parents whose values are different may find themselves alienated and ignored because of their beliefs (Gault, 1989).

A better understanding of the differences can lead to greater cultural sensitivity and more effective measures toward resolving existing barriers. Some of the contrasting values represented within the diverse minority groups of this country are described below.

Contrasting Values of Identity

American minorities hold a wide variety of views on the nature of personal and group identity. A number of these contrast greatly with American majority beliefs. Some of these include:

1. the family and group identity as of primary importance--individual identity is considered secondary;
2. the importance of family's reputation, status, and cohesiveness;
3. group solidarity and collective responsibility instead of individual responsibility;
4. personal esteem based on honor, trustworthiness, and the giving and earning rather than on intellectual, social, and economic status;
5. interpersonal relationships and mutual caring valued over external measures of individual success (Harry, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c).

The differences from majority values that are represented here can lead to significant misperceptions about outcomes considered most important for a child's education and future success. School personnel and families may envision entirely different life roles but fail to communicate these to each other.

Contrasting Views of Disability

As a result of beliefs about disability, some minority groups have a much different perspective on the value of many of the basic special education processes including identification, diagnosis, and intervention. These perspectives may be based on:

1. strong religious beliefs that impact views on the etiology, the functional extent of the disability, and the need for treatment;
2. a holistic view of life and an interrelatedness between body and spirit, and the ineffectiveness of treating one aspect in isolation from the other;
3. the necessary balance between bodily and mental health that individuals must seek for themselves, with outside assistance may neither asked nor wished for;
4. a view that the spirit has chosen a body with disabilities for reasons we cannot understand, thus interventions may be inappropriate;
5. a child with a disability is a blessing from God and a gift (Correa, 1989; Gault, 1989; Harry, 1992a, 1992b).

In addition to religious beliefs they may hold, several cultures have a much less differentiated concept of disability and recognize only extreme deviations or impairments. They find the multiple American categories to be confusing and meaningless. As a result, families may have difficulty understanding and accepting a school's request for special services and programming.

Contrasting Values for Relationships

Despite social changes that have impacted American families, there remains a societal value on the nuclear family as forming the centerpiece for

all primary relationships. Other values of rationalism, efficiency, and independence govern much of the manner for establishing and maintaining relationships. Other cultures may value quite different characteristics and relationship patterns to include:

1. a value on collectivism, harmony, and a social order that extends beyond the nuclear family;
2. relationships governed by proscribed roles regarding subordination, interdependence, reciprocity, obligation, propriety, and cooperation;
3. families and groups that function as strong supports with wide and flexible kinship webs including extended and non-family support relationships;
4. work ethics that include working mothers as evidence of strength and not of need;
5. kinship obligations and fosterage of children as evidence of patterns to strengthen and maintain kinship bonds;
6. childrearing practices based on admonitions and "advising" of children rather than the use of punishments and rewards;
7. a lack of confrontation in relationships with an emphasis on saving face for the person in authority, if conflicts do occur;
8. respect for authority figures including the school with an unwillingness to argue or contradict (Harry 1992a, 1992c).

Families that function within wide kinship webs may not include parents as the "family's" primary decision-makers. Schools may not understand this when planning for parent conferences and IEP meetings. As

a result, the signatures on IEP documents may not represent those who the family or community hold as the responsible party. The strong cultural patterns for resolving conflicts also impact IEP procedures which expect disagreements to be aired openly and presume that both sides are capable of assuming adversarial positions when necessary.

The Impact of Cultural Differences

Although special education legislation has done much to establish and promote the rights of all families, it has had little impact in resolving critical issues of multicultural understanding. In fact, because of its cultural assumptions, the legislation is likely to have exacerbated existing cultural barriers. Attempts to establish legally mandated collaboration and cooperation between parents and schools may not be possible until steps are taken to develop and promote an improved understanding. Friend and Cook (1990) state that initial agreement on philosophy and values is a critical first step and that without it, meaningful collaboration cannot occur.

The initial outcome of cultural dissonance may be significant misunderstandings which may amplify as each party continues to behave in ways that are culturally offensive to the other. Minority families may seek resolution in ways that are culturally appropriate for them--they withdraw out of respect or to allow the school to save face, or they take steps within their own family or community that address their child's issues, regardless of what may have been agreed to on the IEP document. In addition, they may be puzzled and hurt that school personnel spend so little time and energy in establishing ongoing relationships, not only with the family, but with the extended family and their community as well. In their view, this relationship

is the only way to develop a genuine understanding of their child and his or her world.

Parents also may expect educational decisions to incorporate information that addresses the characteristics and needs of the much broader family and community unit. The series of objective measures and scales that appear on the IEP, focused solely upon the individual child and only in the school setting, may seem limited to the point of uselessness. When the school responds with and expects direct communication from parents, relies upon written documentation of contacts and important information, and organizes meetings for rapid decision-making and problem resolution, families may additionally interpret this as rude, overbearing, and controlling (Harry, 1992a).

From the school's perspective, their painstaking planning and efforts to achieve critical outcomes they believe are vital to the child's success may be met with a lack of enthusiasm or outright neglect. School personnel may conclude that a family who does not participate or cooperate with their plans is either unable or unwilling to do so. These families may be judged as "bad parents," lacking both caring and commitment to their child (Harry, 1992a). The result is that schools may begin to limit opportunities and choices for services presented to these families and reduce rather than encourage efforts to mutually resolve perceived differences. Investigations by Mehan, Hertweck, and Meihls (1986) have found that schools responded to minority parents by limiting potential placement or service options for their consideration. In addition, decision making and reporting generally did not follow objective procedures as implied by the legislation and often was heavily

influenced by high status individuals within the school personnel circle. This resulted in further limiting the influence and participation of minority parents and family (Harry, 1992a; Mehan et al., 1986).

It is dangerous to characterize any one group's or individual's values based on ethnicity. Within any cultural group a wide variety of beliefs and values exist, including white Americans. For immigrants, the amount of time spent in this country and the degree of acculturation are important influences on cultural beliefs and attitudes (Harry, 1992a). However, many of the special education processes are based on white middle and upper-middle class values and therefore, value differences and cultural misunderstandings frequently occur (Gault, 1989; Harry, 1992a, 1992c). Because relationships between parents and special education personnel tend to be ongoing, initial disparities and misunderstandings are compounded over time, affecting later interaction patterns. The following chart summarizes the examples and discussion above.

American Culture	Minority Cultures
Focus on skills, plans, needs and preferences, and achievement.	Focus on the group needs, listening, communication, harmony, and personal honor.
Goals to develop independence, self-reliance, assertiveness, competition, and economic success	Goals to develop group interdependence, social harmony, extended support networks, and noncompetitive attributes and skills

Results in judging families as "lazy" and uninterested, unable, or unwilling to understand and reduction in information or choices.	Results in withdrawal, "ignoring" of advice, nonattendance at meetings, and insulting of excluded key decision-makers.

Legislation mandates that school personnel collaborate and involve all parents. Yet, the tools designed for doing so are predicated on communication styles and strategies that are culturally bound. Despite an increasing minority population and their overrepresentation in special education, the legislation suggests no strategies that recognize these profound interaction, philosophical, and life-style differences. The resulting difficulties impact families, but must also affect school personnel. Lareau (1989) cites a Harris poll that found one sixth of former teachers having left because of a lack of community and parental support. For special educators, the sense of isolation from their students' families must be even more pervasive.

Despite the sometimes profound cultural difficulties faced by schools and minority families, parental participation and shared decision making remain the major planning processes for special education programming. This next section reviews several investigations of parental participation and suggests some additional reasons for a lack of family involvement.

Parental Involvement

A critical barrier to greater participation and shared decision making by all parents is that schools often tend to disparage parents and their involvement rather than encouraging it (Hobbs, 1975). Rather than seeking

to include them, particularly for those who may be different in terms of cultural or socioeconomic status, schools may view parents as a source of the child's existing problems and inadvertently diminish the parents' sense of responsibility and capability regarding the education of their child.

Turnbull and Turnbull (1985) asked parents of children with disabilities to describe their experiences with special educators. All were educated professionals, some special educators, yet all had experienced significant barriers and disparagement of their knowledge (Boggs, 1985; Gallagher, & Gallagher, 1985; Helsel, Helsel, Helsel, & Helsel, 1985; Roos, 1985; Schulz, 1985; Turnbull, A., 1985; Turnbull, H., 1985). Boggs (1985) particularly objected to the tendency for professionals to impose their standards for appropriateness, autonomy, and independence onto a child with a disability regardless of the wishes or views of the family. These complaints were from white, well-educated, and professional parents. It can be expected that minority families, with less cultural status and possibly lower income levels, would have even greater difficulties with special educators.

Much of this attitude by school personnel has been encouraged by a "medical model" approach to service delivery in which personnel are seen as "experts," and parents and their children are perceived as necessarily passive recipients of these services. Families who are neither passive nor particularly cooperative with the "expert" advice are judged as problematic and blamed for any resulting problems (Gliedman & Roth, 1980; Harry, 1992c). Much of the current legislation supports this manner of service delivery in terms of "objective" assessments, identification of treatment goals, and application of intervention strategies generated by school personnel (Gliedman & Roth, 1980;

Harry, 1992c). Despite this, a more cooperative and collaborative approach is the ultimate goal in working with parents.

Regardless of ethnicity, parents may feel insufficiently included in planning their child's education. McNair and Rusch (1991) compared parental involvement with desire for involvement in transition meetings for exiting students. Nearly 70% of families desired involvement, yet only 30% had been involved. In general, parents wanted equal participation in decision making more than they had the opportunity to do so, and were willing to make the necessary additional time and energy commitments. Only one of the 85 parents preferred to leave decisions to professionals (McNair & Rusch, 1991).

Parent involvement also has been found to vary by social stratification. Lareau (1989) found that greater educational competence, social status, income and material resources, similarity in perspectives on work, and social networks all were a significant advantage for upper middle-class families in interacting with special education personnel. These parents' interventions and suggestions were more warmly welcomed and they were more likely to achieve a customized and individualized education for their children. In comparison, working class parents tended to receive an undifferentiated and "generic" educational program (Lareau, 1989). In the schools' behalf it might be said that they found upper middle-class families much easier to communicate with and to understand--an example of minimal barriers due to culture, class, and social status.

Also to the advantage of upper middle-class parents, they presumed to have a right to intervene whereas working class parents felt any such intercession was out of their realm of influence. Minority parents also have

felt no such power or right (Harry, 1992a; Lareau, 1989). Lynch and Stein (1987) compared parental involvement by ethnic group and found that Hispanic parents were significantly less involved than Anglo parents but were not less involved that African American parents. Both Hispanic and African American parents offered fewer suggestions than Anglo parents and knew significantly less about the services their child was to receive.

Harry (1992a) summarized common features in 12 empirical and conceptual discussions that examined school participation of minority parents in special education. In general, minority parents were less involved and less informed than other parents. In comparing minority and white parents these studies showed:

1. Lower levels of involvement than white counterparts;
2. Less awareness of special education procedures, rights, and available services;
3. An expressed sense of isolation and helplessness;
4. Low self-confidence in interaction with professionals;
5. Stressful life circumstances that overwhelm parents;
6. Need for logistical supports such as transportation, child care, and respite;
7. Culturally based assumptions of noninterference on the part of parents in school matters;
8. Professionals' implicit or explicit discouragement of parents' participation in the special education process. (p. 100)

Additional barriers described in Harry's (1992a) study of Puerto Rican families. She found a great deal of mistrust due to miscommunication, and frequent confusion about IEP placements and meetings, and missed meetings

as a result. Parents often did not understand the significance of letters asking them to attend meetings or the documents that were produced. For them, important communications took place face-to-face with time spent understanding the dynamics of the family's situation (Harry, 1992a). Specific information provided in culturally appropriate ways and examples of "success" from other Puerto Rican families were found to increase participation.

In a study of Mexican immigrant families, Gault (1989) reported that 70% of the families were satisfied with their involvement with the education of the child with a disability. Although not highly visible at school, they felt their contributions were in providing basic care, attending conferences, and in using the teachers' ideas, although this might not have concurred with the school's perception of "participation." However, Gault (1989) found that parents were confused and uninformed about the type of services their children were receiving and only half agreed with the school's perception as to the severity of the disability.

Gault (1989) also solicited responses from school personnel. In general, the school felt that parents should attend meetings even if they did not understand the procedures. Many teachers responded to potential misunderstandings with suggestions that, "they should ask" "there is no reason for them not to understand," and "we have Spanish translators" (p. 173), without understanding the profound impacts of cultural differences. Other strategies for involvement tended to be traditional (such as attending the PTA) and geared to middle-class and literate parents (Gault, 1989).

In summary, it appears that all parents wish to be more involved than they are. Minority parents are even less involved than white parents and

have a poorer understanding of the special education process and services. School personnel apparently misunderstand the depth of the communication and cultural issues. Their suggestions may be well-intentioned but are inadequate. The next section examines some strategies that have been successfully used to reduce cultural barriers and improve collaboration.

Recommendations

Certain strategies have been effectively used to overcome cultural and other social barriers that exist between school personnel and parents. For minority parents in particular, recommendations include involving parents as peers. Programs have found that assisting parents in becoming better self-advocates can be achieved by teaching how the system works, identifying one's own needs, and learning to access the system appropriately (Martin, Mithaug, Fredericko, & Riley, n.d.). Use of parent groups have proven very successful in providing training and advocacy assistance in ways that promote increased participation (Harry, 1992a). Gliedman and Roth (1980) found that such groups also ensured improved access to their rights despite minority or other social status differences.

> The active involvement of parents' groups, advocacy groups, and other parent-centered or parent-run groups is essential. Without extensive group supports, the provisions for parents' participation and procedural due process of P.L. 94-142 risk the fate of most legal rights in our society: that only the wealthy can afford to have them enforced. (Gliedman & Roth, 1980, p. 195)

Parents often feel more comfortable in learning from each other and in being with each other, particularly if they of the same cultural or social group. School personnel need not be excluded from participating in these

groups and can provide important assistance. Harry (1992a) summarized some of the recommendations from several programs that achieved increased parental involvement:

1. Establish personalized, individual contact with parents.
2. Disseminate information, and gain access to parents through traditional community supports such as churches or ethnic organizations.
3. Educate community leaders in the central issues facing parents of children with disabilities.
4. Recognize that issues of survival may have to be given precedence over educational concerns and be willing to assist parents in such matters.
5. Seek and respond to the expressed needs of parents regarding scheduling, transportation, child care, and other logistical concerns that may hinder their participation in training.
6. Establish peer support groups, with parent-to-parent training. (p. 111)

Rather than using parent groups, Dybwad (1989) supports a one-to-one approach to provide both help and courage to those who have never had or sought outside help. Harry (1992a) recommends using minority parents of older children who have been successful in securing help from the schools as role models and to serve as "advocate helpers" for parents.

Regardless of the particular approach taken, it is important that parents feel comfortable and safe in the environment. Parents also should be encouraged to bring a friend or other family member if they wish. When arranging meetings with the school, staff should make frequent checks for understanding or concerns. Parents also should have an opportunity to meet separately with a specific trusted professional after the meeting to discuss their perceptions (Correa, 1989). In addition, schools need to be sensitive to,

and make accommodations for, families who do not possess the resources of middle-class families. Some, in fact, may be struggling with issues of basic survival. Lynch and Stein (1987) found that 54% of families were unable to attend their last school meeting because of work, time, transportation, or child care conflicts.

In order to increase their understanding of cultural differences and reduce existing barriers, school personnel need information about, and access to, culturally competent practices. Rodriquez (1994) surveyed 100 rural school administrators in the Southwest and found that important competencies included involvement with parents and an understanding of the cultural and linguistic background of the family. Despite their importance however, multicultural skills and expertise may not be available within the available school personnel. Ford (1992) surveyed 30 special education administrators in Ohio regarding inservice training in multicultural education. Although most believed that teachers should participate in such training, only four of the 30 had received any such formal training themselves.

A potential source of cultural expertise is the minority parents themselves (Harry, 1992a). Parents can as members of advisory groups and also assist with training. Minority school personnel as well, can provide valuable information and experiences, some of which may address strategies to successfully balance two or more cultures. However, it is unwise to expect a minority staff member to be a "multicultural" expert because of their ethnicity. Some have found themselves placed in situations where they are expected to have information about which they may know very little (Luft, 1995). In addition, each locale may have highly specific minority populations

with distinct cultural values that nonmembers may not fully understand. Parents and community leaders would function as the best resource in many of these instances (Harry, 1992a).

Strategies for improving staff cultural competence may be specific--a series of informal or formal training programs and inservices--or take a comprehensive planning process that includes school-wide restructuring to address multicultural issues and needs (Fradd and Weismantel, 1989). This latter approach may begin with strategies that develop a school vision and assess current training needs and resources. Other techniques incorporate success strategies used with site based management and organization development in terms of maintaining staff motivation and involvement in the program (Clune & White, 1988; Runkel & Schmuck, 1984).

Regardless of the particular approaches chosen, both parents and school personnel need information and assistance in becoming culturally competent. For parents this includes information about the special education system as well as support from peers. School personnel need information and strategies. As they become more multiculturally competent and comfortable, they will become better able at learning directly from the parents and at the same time, achieve a more collaborative relationship.

Conclusion

Gliedman and Roth (1980) describe having a disability as being within the most completely disenfranchised group from society. Whereas there is disagreement about the extent and degree to which other minorities--women, gays, poor blacks, and others--are genuinely different from society, everyone

agrees that persons with disabilities are indeed distinct (Gliedman & Roth, 1980). The social impact of disability multiplies differences of ethnicity and possible lower income level, thereby increasing the likelihood that parents will be unable to effectively and satisfactorily interact with American institutions, to include participating in decision-making and planning process with special educators. In addition, the mandates for parental participation and decision-making in IEPs require that parents have the education and cultural understanding to comprehend IEP documents. A resulting lack of attendance, participation, or cooperation with written plans is often due to cultural misunderstandings and frustrations. In turn, the response of schools to "help" parents with critical decisions by limiting or withholding information about the wide continuum of alternatives available only creates additional barriers to genuine participation.

The task of resolving the cultural barriers currently rests upon the shoulders of school personnel--it is they who are legally accountable. It requires that they begin to balance educational practices and procedures based upon American cultural values and norms--procedures that are objective, rational, efficient in use of time and resources, and supportive of independence and self-reliance--with potentially highly disparate values and goals of minority families. However, by becoming culturally competent, school personnel will increasingly be able to include the minority parents in the education planning and decision making process. When both parties are better able to share in the responsibility of educating each child, the schools will no longer need to feel quite so burdened with this task. Parents as

well as schools will find their frustrations reduced and there will be less cause for resorting to due process. It is indeed, within the schools' best interest to become culturally competent in dealing with minority families.

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